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## McDermott partner brings plenty to the table

by Maria Kantzavelos

**W**hen Helen R. Friedli receives a visitor in her 55th-floor corner office, she is not likely to emerge from behind a grandiose executive desk.

Rather, visitors join Friedli at the round cherry table where she is often immersed in work as a partner in McDermott Will & Emery.

Friedli said she purposely exchanged a traditional desk for the old library table she saved from storage in 2003, when she was named partner-in-charge of the firm's Chicago office.

"I found attorneys, and even more, non-attorneys coming to talk to me about concerns, issues, challenges, [and] the desk was like a barrier. I was on one side and they were on the other, and that felt very uncomfortable," Friedli said recently. "We had this round table, which I've found much more conducive to a conversation. It makes for a real cooperative feeling of, 'Let's just sit down and talk about this.'"

The first woman in the firm's 72-year history to serve as partner-in-charge of one of its offices and the first female to serve as a member of the firm's executive committee, Friedli is good at breaking barriers. And she doesn't want to build any between herself and her colleagues.

"I think I'm viewed as open and welcoming of people's issues and concerns," she said.

Friedli stepped down from the managing partner position earlier this year. The corporate lawyer said the move allows her to renew her focus on her practice, which is concentrated on mergers and acquisitions of public and private companies, financings and

corporate counseling.

"I'm a firm believer in rotation of management positions. I think different perspectives, new energy, and different experiences all can be positives," she said.

### 141st lawyer

Friedli has kept the round table as her desk. It is, perhaps, just one hint at the unassuming style she displays at a firm that shares a similar, less-than-rigid "personality," she said. It is a personality Friedli said she discovered

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in the firm from the time she joined in 1980 as its 141st lawyer, just after she received her law degree from Indiana University School of Law.

"McDermott always has been much less formal, much more subject to your individual influence. The breadth of your practice and expertise is determined more by what you want to do."

Friedli, 49, has grown up with the firm, which is ranked the seventh-largest law firm in Illinois with 280 lawyers in its flagship Chicago office and more than 1,000 lawyers firm-wide, according to the Chicago Lawyer 2006 Survey of the Largest Law Firms in Illinois.

"It's all about growth and development," Friedli said. "I don't think I've

ever stopped developing professionally or personally in my 26-year career, and I don't think our firm has either."

When Friedli joined McDermott, the firm consisted of its Chicago office and small offices in Miami and Washington, D.C.

Founded in 1934 as a tax practice, McDermott has seen steady growth over the decades, while managing to hold on to its core culture, Friedli said.

"The client emphasis, the lack of hierarchy, the lack of unnecessary regimen, the opportunities to grow and learn — all of that is still here," Friedli said.

Those attributes exist, Friedli said, largely because they were a part of McDermott from the start.

"It had the original flexibility," Friedli said. "We didn't have a lot of that rigidity, so there was constant adjustment. When you're always adjusting to accommodate growth or cultural differences or other challenges, it comes much easier. Change is not so much a disruptive force; it's sort of a constant environment."

### Pink power

When Friedli joined McDermott, she was one of only two women practicing in its corporate department.

She recalled a deal-making session in Texas in the mid-'80s, when the issue of gender and a pink suit appeared to play out in her client's favor.

Friedli, donning a pink pinstriped skirt and jacket, headed to Texas with her client to meet with a group of "good ol' boys" who had taken an aggressive, antagonistic, and almost intimidating tone in dealings over the phone, she recalled.

That sentiment changed, however,

once they all met in person.

“We negotiated all day and it was like dealing with different people. They were not aggressive. They were not antagonistic. They were pretty cooperative,” Friedli said. Her client, who was astounded by the transformation in attitude, chalked it up to the lady in pink.

“He looked at me and said, ‘I can’t believe it; it’s the pink suit. I don’t know if they see you as their mother, their spouse, or their daughter... Whether it’s you or your pink suit, they can’t be tough with you, and that’s really helping our position,’” Friedli said.

Friedli hadn’t given the issue of fashion a second thought when she embarked on the meeting, she said. What really mattered to her was pressing her client’s position.

She said she never paid much attention to debates over what was considered professional in terms of appearance, even while launching her career in a male-dominated area of law.

“Do you dress in a more feminine fashion, in a less feminine fashion? Should you not wear skirts, should you not wear pink? Should you not have your kids’ pictures out? I never very much subscribed to that,” Friedli said.

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Today, McDermott has developed into a business-oriented firm with 15 offices, five of which are outside the U.S. Its Chicago office takes up 12 floors of the AT&T building, 227 W. Monroe St.

And while many large firms have grown through major mergers, McDermott has grown without merging in a significant way with another law firm, said Quentin “George” Heisler Jr., who succeeded Friedli as partner-in-charge of the firm’s Chicago office in March. Heisler, whose practice focuses on estate and business planning, joined McDermott in 1968.



Helen R. Friedli

“We have survived and thrived, and we’re still independent,” Heisler said.

He noted that maintaining the culture of a law firm as it grows can be challenging.

“With great size, and the difficulty of knowing all your partners in the same kind of way, it is difficult to maintain the collegiality that was so pleasant years ago. We have to work hard on it,” Heisler said.

#### **A golf pro’s daughter**

As a new associate in the early ’80s — a boom time in the transactional area — Friedli said she learned how to practice law by immersion, and with the help of the “greatest resource”: the firm’s more experienced lawyers.

“Partners really went out of their way to take the time to provide feedback — positive and negative — which is a wonderful way to learn,” she said.

As the daughter of a golf professional and a middle child of 13 growing up in Indianapolis, Friedli had already been cultivating such valuable skills as building consensus, looking for solutions and negotiating for resources, she said.

She spent her childhood summers at the golf course with her father and siblings, partly playing and partly working in the pro shop and on the food service side of the business her father managed.

“It taught us a lot of social skills

early on, dealing with the public, vendors and customers,” Friedli said. “Dealing with people you know, some you don’t know, some [who] are cooperative, not so cooperative, some [who] were demanding.”

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**Meadows: “She has a wonderful trait**

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Friedli said she was drawn to the practice of law from the time in 8th grade, when she and fellow classmates designed their own field trip to observe a profession as part of an assignment for Career Day.

“A couple of friends and I decided to go to court. That got me interested,” Friedli said. “I really didn’t want to stand up and be a court litigator, but I thought I could use my communications skills — both verbal and writing — to advocate positions.”

She finished college in three years at Purdue University, where she met the man she married and received her bachelor’s degree in industrial management.

After two years of law school at Indiana University School of Law, Friedli moved to Chicago with her husband, and completed her studies at

### **Sizing up firms**

That's when Friedli learned about Chicago's different firms — and law firm cultures — and concluded that McDermott would be the right fit for her.

"There is a fairly distinct culture at every firm," Friedli said. "You can be successful in other places, but there's something that really makes you want to do your best, brings out the best in you, gives you the opportunities to really shine. If you find that — so you're really maximizing your potential — it can't be any better."

In her career, Friedli has worked on hundreds of deals — ranging from the recent negotiation to relocate the Vancouver Grizzlies basketball franchise to Memphis and secure government financing for a new arena there, to unique structures for sales of companies and financing of ventures.

"She has a wonderful trait of being a strong negotiator without antagonizing the opponent," said Stanley H. Meadows, a longtime partner in McDermott's corporate department

who has worked with Friedli on many transactions.

While the big transactions are the ones that typically make headlines, Friedli said she doesn't look to size as a measure of her success.

"The best transactions are where I was an effective advocate for my client, but no one feels taken advantage of," she said.

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**Friedli: "Every lawyer's obligation**

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Friedli said she finds satisfaction in challenging deals such as the purchases of companies out of bankruptcies and their effects on hundreds or thousands of employees.

"To be able to pull success from the fire is particularly challenging, but also rewarding," she said.

Friedli has managed to balance a

demanding practice and leadership responsibilities, with her life outside the office. A self-described soccer mom of two daughters, she teaches Sunday School at a Catholic parish in Winnetka and serves on the board of an organization that provides soccer programs for inner city youth.

The key to striking that balance, Friedli said, is not being afraid to ask for support when you need it.

"There is flexibility. There are resources, if you ask," said Friedli, pointing out that McDermott is among the firms that have initiated options for reduced-time schedules for attorneys at all levels.

Meanwhile, Friedli intends to press on at the same firm where she got her start.

"Part of my obligation, and every lawyer's obligation, is to leave the firm better than when you came," Friedli said. "You do your 20, 30 or 40 years, and it should be better for your having been there. It should be higher quality, even more client-focused and [with more] well-trained lawyers than when you came. That's what you want to leave behind — that's your legacy.★"